

SACRAMENTO BEE (CA)

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The CIA's Mexican Connection

The United States attorney in San Diego, William H. Kennedy, got into trouble with the Justice Department for trying to do his job, in the course of which he ran afoul of the Central Intelligence Agency, which didn't want him to do it.

At issue was the question: Should a one-time high security official in the Mexican government be prosecuted for his alleged role in a \$30 million to \$40 million car-theft ring operating in Southern California, or should his involvement be hushed up because he was also an alleged source of information for the CIA?

The CIA, predictably, pressured the Justice Department for the hush-up. Kennedy, more concerned about the losses to the owners of the 4,000 stolen cars the ring sold to various Mexican officials, insisted on prosecution. When the Justice Department blocked his efforts, he went public with the facts of the case. A Reagan administration appointee last November, Kennedy now has been told by the White House to resign or be fired.

Quite clearly, circumstances can arise in the shadowy world of foreign intelligence when the national interest may require granting criminal immunity in order to protect an informant. Just as clearly, however, in this

instance the CIA's worry wasn't the Mexican informant himself, but what one senior Justice Department official described as "potential damage to the institutional relationship" — that is, U.S. relations with Mexico — as a result of revealing a high Mexican official's cooperation with American intelligence.

That being the case, we can see no reason in the world why Kennedy shouldn't have been permitted to seek the indictment and do his job. The Mexican official's prosecution for car theft would have had nothing to do with his CIA role, assuming, as we tentatively do, that the agency wasn't also involved in the theft ring. The way the whole episode was handled only fed Kennedy's understandable indignation; the cover was blown anyway.

One needn't endorse Kennedy's decision to air the matter publicly — thereby pre-empting the judgment of higher officials on the national security interest — in order to agree that in the circumstances the Mexican official should have been, should be, prosecuted. It strains credulity and all common sense to assert that any single intelligence source can provide such valuable, otherwise unattainable information that he should be given, literally, a license to steal.